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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the underlying dynamics of attendance rates of secondary school special education students at risk for dropping out. Seventy-eight mildly disabled special education students enrolled in an urban work readiness program were interviewed to assess the effects of job and affective skill training on their attitudes toward school. Only feelings of belonging to the school culture differentiated among students with low, moderate, and high attendance rates. The data supported the proposition that students with low attendance rates were more strongly affected by outside influences (friends, home responsibilities) than by school-related activities and job training. Five characteristics were identified as indicative of alienation from the school culture and early dropping out: being a loner, absences condoned by the home, unique dress characteristics, full-time employment, and drugs and/or erratic, hostile behavior. (Appendixes include interview response form and percentage of responses by attendance rate, and follow-up interview script. Contains 21 references.) (Author/YLB)

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The Attitude Toward School of Secondary Special Education Students with High, Moderate, and Low Attendance Rates

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Abstract

Educators face the problem of low attendance and high drop out rates, an especially acute problem among urban special education students. This study assessed the underlying dynamics of attendance rates of secondary school special education students at risk for dropping out. Seventy-eight mildly disabled special education students enrolled in an urban work readiness program were interviewed to assess the effects of job and affective skill training on their attitudes toward school. Only feelings of belonging to the school culture differentiated among students with low, moderate, and high attendance rates. The data supports the proposition that students with low attendance rates are more strongly affected by "outside" influences (e.g., friends, home responsibilities) than by school related activities and job training. Early warning signs of dropping out are enumerated to help schools target intervention efforts.

Educators face the problem of low attendance and high drop out rates. This problem is especially acute among urban special education students. The high dropout rate has serious, destructive ramifications for society.

Dropout rates are even more pronounced for mildly disabled students capable of being mainstreaming than they are for nondisabled students (e.g., Lichtenstein & Zantal-Wiener, 1988). Blackorby, Edgar, and Kortering (1991) reported that 85% of mildly disabled students surveyed dropped out of school. In New York City over half of special education students failed to graduate (New York City Board of Education, 1991). Understanding the dynamics of dropping out can help educators make decisions likely to enhance these retention rates. In reviewing the literature on dropping out of school, Hendrick, Macmillan, and Balow (1989) concluded that "the regrettable failing of research efforts to date has been in not focusing more attention on those dropouts most at risk, i.e., those with learning disabilities" (p. 22). This study assessed the underlying dynamics of attendance rates of special education students at risk for dropping out.

Affective Factors

Overall, the literature suggests that students who feel good about themselves (i.e., affect) in school and perceive that the program in which they are enrolled provides important preparation for the world of work (i.e., relevance) are more likely remain in school than those who lack that belief. Martinez (1986) found that negative teacher attitude and infrequent positive interactions with teachers helped distinguish school attenders from non-

attenders. Similarly, Seidel and Vaughn (1991) found that learning disabled school dropouts felt more alienation toward classmates learning disabled persisters.

It is important to note that the positive relationship between dropping out and negative affect exists across cultures. For example, Alaskan female teenagers reported that low self-esteem, isolation and alienation significantly influenced their leaving school (Bruce, 1990); Native American high school leavers reported teacher indifference as a significant factor (Colardarci, 1983); and Chinese youth identified "genuine care and concern" as significant factors keeping them in school (Guolin, 1988). The information on the social aspects of schooling and dropout rates generally supports Tidwell's (1988) conclusion that "the attitudes students have toward school and the degree of students' social integration into the school environment are related to early school departures" (p. 940). McPartland and Slavin (1990) argued that to lessen the attrition of special education students, school must provide both success and positive student/adult relationships.

Relevance

Motivation theory and research suggests that students are more likely to be motivated about program participation and remain in school if they believe their program satisfies their critical needs or will ultimately benefit them (Wood, 1991). The more school programs evoke memories of past failures or unpleasantness, and the less students believe school will contribute to post-graduation success, the less the likelihood of their remaining in school. This may explain why alternative

educational settings that impose curricula and assessment procedures similar to those of traditional school settings have greater dropout problems (Driscoll, Berle, Mandell, & Schneider, 1985; Glasser, Kley & Raymond, 1982; and Silvestri, 1986).

Naylor (1987) found perceptions of "disconnectness" a major factor influencing attrition. Students failed to see the connection between what was taught and their working future. To overcome disconnectedness and reverse the dropout rate, she recommended (a) extensive career exploration and related career education experiences, (b) vocational programs that direct dropout prone students to job specific training courses, and (c) enhanced linkages between vocational experiences and other school activities. Similarly, Okolo and Sitlington (1986) recommended that career education programs for learning disabled students stress (a) job related interpersonal and academic skill instruction; (b) in-depth career vocational assessment; (c) occupational awareness, exploration, and basic work experiences; (d) post school placement and follow-up. Miller (1987) found that in addition to individualizing instruction and stressing outcomes, successful programs for at-risk students focused on real life problems and incorporated community service experiences. Clearly, the emphasis on real life problems and community service is designed to increase student perceptions of relevance. Analogously, McPartland and Slavin (1990) posited that to reduce attrition for special education students, programs must address school relevance and outside interferences.

One interpretation of the literature suggests that solutions to the dropout problem must emanate from an examination of the school's structure and curriculum and not from a deficit perspective in terms of the dropout. As Blackorby, Edgar and Kortering (1991) stated, "A more productive approach may be to study the contextual issues rather than individual dropouts" (p. 111). If solutions emphasize diagnosing real or presumed deficits of students "at-risk" for dropping out and trying to change them rather than creating environments students find attractive and meaningful, the problem will remain unsolved. Developing programs that meet student needs, and which students believe will meet their needs, in an accepting, growth-oriented school culture, appears critical for reversing what has been an intractably high secondary school dropout rate.

Lichtenstein and Zantal-Weiner (1988) have indicated a dearth of research related specifically to special education school dropouts. This lack of research is especially acute for programs which have as their goal entry level participation by special education students in the world of work. Therefore, this investigation was conducted to examine the degree to which both school structure and curriculum affect the perceptions of mildly disabled students "at-risk" for dropping out of school.

New York City Board of Education Program:

The New York City Board of Education Citywide Secondary School Program is an alternative high school program designed to provide relevant social and work preparation experience for mildly handicapped special education students "at-risk" for dropping out. The curriculum and the nature of everyday experien-

ces differs greatly from traditional high school curricula, procedures, and organization.

From June 1987 to June 1989 school attendance in "Alternative Program A," one of eight New York City Board of Education alternative secondary programs increased from 51% to 74%, where it remained throughout the duration of this study. "Alternative Program A" was selected for this reason. Importantly, this attendance change occurred concurrently with the implementation of a new program of study which incorporated some of the suggestions in the literature cited above to improve the quality of secondary programs.

The hypothesis that students positively perceived the new program emerged from this concurrence of factors. To examine the relationship between (a) student attitudes toward the acquisition of job-related skills and toward affective factors and (b) their attendance, students in "Alternative Program A" were interviewed.

The transition-to-work curriculum of "Alternative Program A" is a five year course of study which gradually introduces students to the world of work in preparation for entry level positions. Unlike traditional high school programs where courses are departmentalized and students have several teachers a day, this program provided students with a teacher and paraprofessional five periods a day in a class with a low student-to-teacher ratio.

In year one the teacher spends five 45-minute teaching periods with the same youngsters with a 12:1:1 staff to student ratio (student: teacher: paraprofessional). Shop experiences in building maintenance, food, clerical skills, and automotive

skills are combined with visitations to related job sites. Students are exposed to numerous career possibilities.

In year two, students select an area of concentration from their first year experiences. Concordant with Frazier and Stone (1983), who assert that student curricular preference is one way to help prevent students from dropping out, the decision is not imposed upon students. Students participate in four shop periods in a preferred area of concentration. Workforce literacy and mathematics skills are integrated with the demands of the selected career area.

In year three students participate in a cooperative learning model where they alternatively attend school and community sponsored worksites in two week cycles. Worksite experiences are determined by students' areas of interest and the type of training received during their first two years in the program. The Workforce literacy and mathematics skills taught in the school enable students to successfully complete tasks assigned to them at the Worksite.

In year four a full immersion work experience in the students chosen career field occurs. Students have opportunities to refine both their vocational and affective work experience skills. Job related literacy skills, mathematics skills, and values clarification sessions are provided several periods daily for a total of ninety minutes. Students graduate after successful completion of year four. However, they remain eligible for transitional services in the fifth year of the program. In year five employed graduates receive needed additional support to help overcome any transitional difficulties they face.

Within this framework, this study examined student perceptions of the degree to which affective factors and the acquisition of job-related skills contributed to the attitudes of "at-risk" secondary school learning disabled students with high medium, and low attendance rates.

Method

The special education school in which "Alternative Program A" was housed served 131 special education students ages 14-9 to 21-0. Program acceptance required prior identification of "at risk" for dropping out of school, and voluntary selection of "Alternative Program A's" entry work oriented program. Most students traveled to school by public transportation, some traveling more than an hour daily.

"Alternative Program A" meet New York City criteria as a SIE (Special Instructional Environment) IV program. Students served in SIE IV programs have the following characteristics (New York City Board of Education, 1990).

1. Physical Development: The student's vision, hearing, health, or motor development is normal or can be addressed within the school, such as a resource room for hearing impaired students.
2. Academic Development: The student is unable to meet the requirements for a high school diploma and demonstrates severe academic difficulties. His or her reading level is below grade 3. These instructional deficits cannot be attributable only to erratic school attendance, prolonged absence from instruction, or recent arrival to formal public

schooling. These educational needs require specialized instruction on a full-time basis.

3. Learning Characteristics: The student's intellectual functioning falls within the 70 to 100 IQ range as determined by WISC-R scores, but the student demonstrates the ability to achieve functional literacy. The student requires intensive additional strategies and techniques in order to acquire skills and information.

4. Handicapping Condition: The student has been identified as learning disabled with or without another handicapping condition (pp. 154-158)

Seventy-eight students who were new entrants into the program were identified as subjects in this study. Of the 78 students selected, 72 had WISC-R Full Scale IQs that fell in the "below average" category (IQs between 70 and 89); six had scores that fell in the "average" range (IQs between 90 and 110). Student ages ranged from 15 years, 2 months to 20 years, 2 months (mean = 17 years, 3 months; standard deviation = 1 year, 3 months). Thirty-three students were African-American, 40 Latino, and 5 Asian-American. Sixty-nine students were male. At the time of the study, 37% of the students (n = 29) were high attenders (above 84% attendance); 24% (n = 19) were moderate attenders (70 to 84% attendance); and 38% (n = 30) were low attenders (below 70% attendance). Categorization of student attendance followed New York City Board of Education guidelines. All subjects came from families which were at the federally defined poverty level.

Material

An interview response form to assess students' attitudes toward the program (see Figure 1) was jointly created by the principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, four teachers, and a professor of education from a local college. The form was designed to be comprehensible to the program's unique student body and to reflect the emphasis of the program. Thus, it focused on (a) job-related skills and (b) affect. As previously discussed, these two domains appear to critically influence student decisions to continue in school

Items were carefully worded to ensure student understanding of what they were asked. To assess understanding, a pilot investigation was undertaken. A final 9 item response form evolved from the pilot investigation. Six items focused on "affect" and three on "job-related skills."

Procedure

During March, 1990 individual interviews of approximately ten minutes in length were conducted in an empty classroom by a bilingual English/Spanish speaking paraprofessional trained in the testing procedure. The interview response form was tape recorded and then presented to the subjects simultaneously in oral and written form. (Tape recording was used to reduce the possibility that students would primarily respond to please the interviewer, often a problem in interview studies.) After introducing himself to the youngster and explaining the purpose of the interview, the paraprofessional completed the sample item with the student to ensure that the task was understood. Once satisfied that this was the case, the tape recorder was turned on and

the interview response form was heard. A Spanish version of the interview response form was individually administered to three youngsters for whom Spanish was their primary language. A follow-up session was also conducted with students to ascertain the reasons for their answers.

In effect the interviewer was removed from the process since a different person -- hence a different voice and speech pattern -- was heard on the tape. The interviewer merely stated the purpose of and monitored the session to eliminate glitches. The interviewer instructed students to follow along on their written copy by placing a check in the appropriate space. If students indicated they did not understand an item, the interviewer provided a brief explanation, devoid of indications as to what might be a preferred answer. If students lost their place or needed other assistance, the interviewer intervened. Presentation of the interview form on audio tape also eliminated the influence of inadequate reading skills.

Data Analysis

Chi square analyses were used to test examine the variance of the responses of high, moderate, and low attenders' attitude toward school for each item in the questionnaire.

In order not to lose potentially valuable information which may warrant further study with larger and/or different samples or more refined instrumentation, differences at a .10 level of probability were considered significant. This is explored more fully in the discussion section.

Results

As shown in Table 1 on page 22, a chi-square value of 13.01 (6, N=76) for responses to question 3 discriminated among the attendance groups at the .05 level of significance. Chi-square values for item 7 (6, N= 78) of 10.75 and item 9 (6, N= 77) of 10.83 discriminated among the attendance groups at the .10 level of significance. Differences among the responses to the remaining six items yielded probability levels at or above .19, suggesting they did not reliably discriminate among attendance groups.

Figure 1 on page 23 presents the individual questions and the percentages of responses organized by attendance rate.

A follow up analysis of the questions with chi-square probability levels significant at .10 or less indicated the following.

Item 3: "In this school I feel like I fit in" The significant chi square cell was low attenders' preference for response "b," "No, I do not feel like I fit in." Individual follow-up interviews found that nine of the 11 low attenders who selected "b" preferred the company of neighborhood friends "from the street" rather than the "new" kids in the building. (See Appendix A on page 26 for the interviewer script during these interviews.)

Item 7: "This school helps me get along better with adults" The significant chi square cells were high attenders selection of "b," "Sometimes it (the school) helps me get along with adults," and "a," "Yes, it helps me to get along with adults."

Item 9: "How do you feel about this school?" The significant chi square cell was the moderate attenders selection of "c," "I'm

not sure if I like this school." (However, the observed frequency in this category was two, a number far too low upon which to make inferences.)

Discussion

As previously noted, a .10 probability was employed to ascertain statistical significance to avoid losing potentially valuable information.

Linton and Gallo (1975) noted that "there is nothing sacred" about the .01 or .05 levels of significance (p. 48). The alpha level should be set by a consideration of the consequences of making Type I or Type II errors. In some situations they suggest that an alpha level of .20 can be the better choice. Given the sample size and the consequences of a Type II error, the .10 level was chosen for between-subject comparisons, so as not to conclude that "no difference" exists when in actuality real differences exist. The .10 level reduces the possibility of disregarding a potentially promising treatment or instrument in its initial stages of development due to (a) the limitations of statistical tests which, in part, derive their power from the number of subjects in groups, and (b) the possibility that the treatment or instrument needs further refinement to manifest a more potent impact. All three items differing among the high, moderate, and low attendance rates at the .10 level of significance were designed to tap the affective domain.

If the more stringent .05 probability level is used to determine significance, only responses to question 3 distinguished among attendance groups. Concordant with the trend when the .10 level of significance was used, this item was

designed to tap the affective domain. Regardless of significance level used, groups did not differ on responses to the three questions directly assessing job preparation ("This school gets me ready to get a job." "In this school the classes that I take ... help me decide what job I want." "I think that going to work as part of my school day is a good idea."). This finding is potentially important considering the emphasis in the literature on job-related skill development and affective training for students at-risk of dropping out. (While participating students were classified as SIE IV by the school district, the label should be de-emphasized and the emotional, physical, and learning characteristics emphasized when considering the results.)

While both job-related skills and affective components are essential and should constitute integral parts of a comprehensive strategy, programs to reverse attrition need to address the youngster. As indicated by post-investigation interviews with low attenders who selected response "b" to item 3 (Item 3: "In this school I feel like I fit in." Response b: "No, I do not feel like I fit in"), these students preferred association with neighborhood groups; they did not seem to value membership in a group associated with and cultivated within the school did not seem to be desirable for these low attending students. Typical of their responses are the statements:

"I'm in a gang and I'd rather be with them."

"I miss my homeboys."

"I'd rather chill with my friends."

"These kids are special eds., I'm not like them."

"On my block no one calls me special ed; here this is a special ed. school."

"The teachers are okay, but outside is more fun and I can make more money."

Given the methodological limitations of interviews at a single site, with relatively small numbers of students, the results of this study and its extrapolations must be considered tentative. Clearly, experimental research, with large samples, across a variety of settings, is needed for conclusions to be held with a high degree of certitude. The results of this study offer direction for designing these experimental programs. The results also offer direct service programs with information that may prove useful while the field waits for more definitive results.

The findings suggest that low attending special education students, like those in this study, are unlikely to benefit greatly from job readiness training in a positive, affectively-oriented environment if the program fails to attend to the world in which they live. For low attenders, programs which ignore what McPartland and Slavin (1990) call "outside interferences," such as gang membership, substance abuse, and the possibility and reality of teen-aged pregnancy may be doomed to failure. A logical inference from the findings is that community-related programs, with active home and community outreach components, may prove more successful in encouraging low-attending, mildly disabled special education students to attend school. In fact, three low-attenders were adamant that travel was a problem. They were very direct: "It's too far to travel." Given these

statements, the affiliation preferences of low attenders, and the low status with which many low-attenders viewed their in-school peers, it makes sense to consider placing programs in neighborhood schools and identifying and removing that which they consider stigmatizing. Locally housed programs with strong home and community outreach components, sensitive to the local culture and responsive to neighborhood forces which impact on low-attenders may have far greater potential for positively influencing retention than programs far distant from students' neighborhoods housed at a large centralized site.

Despite the school's attempt to provide students with choices and to help them feel socially comfortable, low-attenders, as a group, were explicit that they felt they did not fit into the school. Training both regular and special education teachers to identify youngsters who feel out of place in school is an important, initial step in combating low-attendance and attrition. Training only special education teachers will likely prove inadequate as many special education students experience their greatest difficulties in mainstreamed or nonacademic (e.g., lunchroom) situations.

Follow-up discussions with teachers in "Alternative Program A" identified five salient characteristics indicative of "alienation" from the school culture. The following behaviors may appear either individually or in combination.

1. Being a Loner: These students express that they "don't need this," referring to school activities such as clubs,

teams, or special events. Although loners may obtain good grades, they do not involve themselves in "extra curricular" school sponsored activities.

2. Absences Condoned By the Home: These students have patterns of absences ostensibly condoned by the home. Common are frequent notes, which may or may not be legitimate, indicating the need to care for a relative or help in family emergencies.

3. Unique Dress Characteristics: Some students exhibit their feelings of uniqueness and disdain through dress. "Overdressing" in a flashy fashion may be a student's way of declaring uniqueness while manifesting disengagement from peers and the school.

4. Full Time Employment: Students who work full time are clearly in danger of dropping out. They have little opportunity for study or homework and are often tired in class.

5. Drugs and/or Erratic, Hostile Behavior: Erratic or hostile behavior is a common precursor of dropping out. Students on drugs often exhibit such behavior.

Identifying the exact factors influencing the decisions of individual students is difficult and requires going beyond nomothetic factors to examining idiographic factors impacting on individual students. Nevertheless, program design requires that secondary school educators understand the forces which influence the decisions of groups of students and initially design programs to address group needs and subsequently adapt program specifics to meet individual student needs. The findings of this study

provide information helpful in directing future research and program efforts to address the needs of mildly handicapped urban youth "at risk" for dropping out of school.

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Table 1

Rank Ordering of Probability Levels of Chi Square Differences (df = 6)

Rank	Question No.*	Chi Square	Probability Level
1	3(A)	13.010	.0429 †
2	9(A)	10.830	.0939 ††
3	7(A)	10.750	.0964 ††
4	1(J)	8.672	.1929
5	2(A)	6.908	.3295
6	4(J)	5.938	.4302
7	5(A)	5.857	.4393
8	8(A)	4.807	.5688
9	6(J)	4.023	.6736

* (A) denotes an affective item; (J) denotes a job-skill item

† Significant at or less than .05

†† Significant at or less than .10

Figure 1
Interview Response Form and Percentage
of Responses by Attendance Rate

Sample Question

In this school I get reading and math every day.

a. Yes I get reading and Math every day.
b. No, I don't get reading and math every day.
c. I'm not sure it I get reading and math every day.
d. I can't answer this question

Actual Questions

1 (J). This school gets me ready to get a job.

a. Yes, it gets me ready to get a job.
H = 86%, M = 89%, L = 69% ††
b. No, it does not get me ready to get a job.
H = 10%, M = 0%, L = 10%
c. I don't know if it gets me ready.
H = 3%, M = 11%, L = 17%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 0%, M = 0%, L = 7%

2 (A). In this school there are things to do that make me feel good about myself.

a. Yes, there are things to do that make me feel good about myself.
H = 50%, M = 39%, L = 35%
b. No, there are no things to do that make me feel good about myself.
H = 0%, M = 30%, L = 10%
c. There are some things to do that make me feel good about myself.
H = 43%, M = 30%, L = 52%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 7%, M = 0%, L = 3%

† The domain identifications (A) for affective and (J) for job-related have been placed on the form for the reader's benefit. These designations were not on the form provided students.

†† H = High Attenders, M = Moderate Attenders, L = Low Attenders

3 (A). In this school I feel like I fit in. [Difference significant at .05.]

a. Yes, I feel like I fit in.
H = 68%, M = 42%, L = 45%
b. No, I do not like I fit in.
H = 11%, M = 11%, L = 38%
c. I don't know it I fit in.
H = 11%, M = 26%, L = 7%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 11%, M = 21%, L = 10%

4 (J). In this school the classes that I take in foods, building maintenance, auto or clerical help me decide what job I want to do.

a. Yes, the classes help me decide what Job I want to do.
H = 79%, M = 89%, L = 70%
b. No, the classes don't help me decide what job I want to do.
H = 7%, M = 6%, L = 3%
c. I don't know it these classes help me decide what job I want to do.
H = 11%, M = 0%, L = 23%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 4%, M = 6%, L = 3%

5 (A). This school helps me to get along with other students.

a. Yes, it helps me get along, with other students.
H = 50%, M = 53%, L = 40%
b. No, it does not help me get along with other students.
H = 0%, M = 11%, L = 17%
c. Sometimes it helps me get along with other students.
H = 43%, M = 32%, L = 33%
d. I cannot answer this question.
H = 7%, M = 5%, L = 10%

6 (J). I think that going to work as part of my school day is a good idea.

a. Yes, I think it is a good idea.
H = 79%, M = 68%, L = 83%
b. No, I don't think it is a good idea.
H = 7%, M = 5%, L = 7%
c. I'm not sure that it's a good idea.
H = 7%, M = 16%, L = 10%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 7%, M = 11%, L = 0%

7 (A). This school helps me get along better with adults. [Difference significant at .10.]

a. Yes, it helps me get along, with adults.
H = 75%, M = 53%, L = 36%
b. No, it does not help me get along with adults.
H = 4%, M = 5%, L = 13%
c. Sometimes it helps me get along with adults.
H = 14%, M = 37%, L = 45%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 7%, M = 5%, L = 7%

8 (A). In this school I like the people who teach me.

a. Yes, I like the people who teach me.
H = 89%, M = 75%, L = 70%
b. No, I don't like the people who teach me.
H = 4%, M = 5%, L = 10%
c. I'm not sure if I like the people who teach me.
H = 4%, M = 15%, L = 17%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 4%, M = 5%, L = 3%

9 (A). How do you feel about this school? [Difference significant at .10.]

a. I like this school.
H = 82%, M = 58%, L = 50%
b. I don't like this school.
H = 7%, M = 5%, L = 20%
c. I'm not sure if I like this school.
H = 11%, M = 26%, L = 27%
d. I can't answer this question.
H = 0%, M = 11%, L = 3%

Appendix A

Follow-up Interview Script

Say to student:

"What you and I say here is confidential. Except for me no one will know what you say. You picked response `b' to this item (the interviewer points to and reads item # 3: `In this school, I feel like I fit in'). I would like you to try to help me find out more about your answer. Can you tell me what you were thinking when you picked this answer?"

If no response, say:

Can you tell me some reasons why you said you feel like you do not fit in this school? I'll give you some time to think.

If still no response, say:

"Now think a minute and try to tell me why you did not pick this answer." (Interviewer points to and reads responses "a," "c," and "d.")

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